



Tiger Lily Florist

131 Spring Street

Charleston, SC 29043

Manny and Clara Gonzales, Owners

A Small Business Flowers (Literally) in the Lowcountry

Charleston, SC – Although roses still say “I love you” and a mixed bouquet “Thanks a bunch,” florists have entered a sales slump in the last decade. But for Tiger Lily Florist and its owners, Manny Gonzales and his wife Clara, the floral business is blossoming. Their only challenge is “keeping up with demand.”

Manny and Clara Gonzales, both natives of Chicago, were newlyweds when their employer, Marriott Hotel, transferred them to its hotel catering operation in Charleston, SC. When the Marriott hotel property in Charleston was sold, Manny and Clara had already “fallen in love with Charleston” and the Lowcountry lifestyle. The Gonzaleses decided to decline Marriott’s offer of Manny’s choice of several positions in other cities. After 12 years of working for the hotel industry, Manny and Clara decided to work for themselves. “There is no other way to go than owning your own small business,” says Manny. In 1996, the Gonzaleses purchased a struggling flower shop in downtown Charleston and transformed it into Tiger Lily Florist, their personal small business success story.

Much of Tiger Lily Florist’s success stems from the Gonzales’ savvy entrepreneurship. In 2001, they formed a partnership with local funeral homes, a business move that garnered them the cover of *Floral Management Magazine*. In early 2002, they expanded upon their concept of servicing the greater public and entered into a partnership with Earth Fare organic grocery stores. Tiger Lily won the 2004 Charleston Small Business of the Year Award, its “crown jewel.”

Of course, Tiger Lily’s success also lies in Manny’s and Clara’s dedication to providing a superior product with superior customer service. “We’ve just thrown away all industry standards and said, ‘We’re going to be great,’” Manny says. Tiger Lily has been voted Best Florist six years in a row by the readers of the *Charleston City Paper*, from 2000 to the present year. Its clients include Middleton Plantation and Gardens, Kiawah Island’s Sanctuary Resort, Historic Charleston Riverview Hotel, and Moo Roo Handbags. *Elegant Bride Magazine* named Tiger Lily Florist “One of America’s Best Wedding Flower Designers” in 2005. “Our success is not in the form of some magic bullet, it’s in trying to be exceptional in the basic business principles of service, product quality, and customer satisfaction,” Manny says.

Many small business owners, strongly independent by nature, are unwilling to reach out for help, according to Manny. But the Gonzaleses know the importance of seeking assistance and advice from institutions like the SBA. "The SBA raises their (the small businesses') edge – just one tax break or seminar... can make all the difference in the world," Manny says. At the end of the 2003 fiscal year, Tiger Lily Florist had made over \$940,000 -- a sales growth of 630% since its debut. That year, wishing to both expand Tiger Lily and to occupy their own building, the Gonzaleses sought the help of the SBA. The SBA helped them to procure two micro loans totaling \$85,000 to purchase and renovate Tiger Lily's new home -- an early 20th century gas station popular with Charleston's architecture aficionados. The former gas station has become a 7,000 square foot flower shop and studio that has won numerous design and building awards, including the 2004 Palmetto Architecture Construction and Engineering (PACE) Merit Award – Historic.

Tiger Lily's presence has helped to rejuvenate the local community; indeed, it is part of the federally-funded Renewal Community Program for the city of Charleston, one of only 19 cities nationwide to offer the program. The Renewal Community Program provides tax breaks and other financial incentives to business owners who develop property in designated "revitalization areas." Tiger Lily currently employs two residents from the area. Last year, Tiger Lily's first year in the historic building, gross sales increased 32% and have already risen another 26% this year. In honor of their achievements with Tiger Lily, the Gonzaleses were named the runners-up for the SBA 2005 Small Businessperson(s) of the Year for the state of South Carolina.

The Gonzaleses have also worked with SCORE and its counselors to ensure the continuance of Tiger Lily's success. "Those folks are a true inspiration for me," Manny says. They offer "a gold mine of experiences." The Gonzales' most recent visit with SCORE in April 2005 covered what Manny calls "cash flow tips and traps."

Manny and Clara know that the success of their business has only been possible with the overwhelming support of the community. Therefore, they recognize the importance of giving back to the community. Tiger Lily Florist donates flowers exceeding \$10,000 in retail value to two charitable fundraisers each year. The American Cancer Society committee recently recognized the Gonzaleses' and Tiger Lily's contributions at its annual Hope Ball. In addition, Manny and Clara volunteer for the Trident United Way Crisis Hotline and for the South Carolina Birds of Prey Center.

Manny and Clara Gonzales reside with their two children, Ruby and Luke, in Mt. Pleasant, SC. Tiger Lily Florist will be featured in the December 2005 issue of *Southern Living Magazine*.

